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Virtual Communities in the Academic Space

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STUDENT LIFE

Whether you love or hate online school, there is no doubt that students have gotten very creative with building virtual communities throughout the pandemic. From Discords to virtual study sessions to simulated virtual classrooms, students have created digital substitutes for in-person social connection. While these virtual communities are not the same as in-person connections, they do provide some stability as students navigate the ever-changing experiences of online learning. However, these virtual communities raise the question: Have students been enjoying this social aspect of virtual school or have these communities made participating in school harder? It's important to understand the complex ups and downs of virtual communities in academic spaces to reveal how they impact students.

The COVID-19 Omicron variant has stolen yet another semester from students—although there is hope to return to in-person learning soon—and students have had to adjust to virtual learning after a semester on campus. Students have had to continue ways to stay socially connected in the virtual realm. Discord chats are among the most popular virtual means of staying socially connected with classmates in academic spaces. These chats, often created in the first week of classes, are one of the very few ways students are able to stay connected with their classmates for the semester. Students use these chats for everything from casual comments about the weather to collectively freaking out about upcoming tests. All in all, they have provided virtual communities to help make online learning feel less isolating.

Often, the course Discord chat blowing up during class time is the only interaction among students in academic spaces for the whole week. This is incredibly difficult to ignore during class time. Are these virtual communities truly helping or are they too distracting? These virtual communities within academic spaces have put students in a tough situation with balancing their socialization and their academics. Many students have found themselves in the predicament of choosing between social interaction and actively focusing on lectures. Conversely, these chats are often the only things keeping classmates connected during these times, something that used to be achieved with the common four walls of a lecture hall. An increase in social interaction, mutual support, and overall mental health are just a few of the many positives to these virtual communities in academic spaces.

However, virtual lectures already require significantly more effort to stay focused and participate compared to in-person lectures. This is mostly due to the fact that virtual lectures are comprised of many black squares with names on them; that is the extent to which we get to know our classmates. With the introduction of virtual communities, from online group chats to virtual study sessions, the inability to remain focused and participate is further increased. Focusing on an online lecture full of black screens for classmates while typing in the course Discord chat is infinitely more difficult than having whispered conversations in a lecture hall while remaining attentive. With cameras off and microphones muted, students are constantly having to worry about missing out on what could be their only social interaction with classmates for the week while simultaneously worrying about missing out on important lecture material.

In my experience as a third-year commuter student, I have found it nearly impossible to get to know my classmates during online learning. Virtual communities have been incredibly important to stay connected with fellow students in academic spaces, despite them coming with the cost of lost focus. Outside of academic spaces, there are virtual communities that bring people together but students need the same social connectivity in academic spaces.

On one hand, these virtual communities have created social connectivity among students at a time where socialization and student life are at an all-time low. On the other hand, virtual communities require students to split their focus during lecture time, often making it more difficult to actively participate in classes. Despite the struggle to balance these positives and negatives, virtual communities continue to thrive in academic spaces, revealing the need to have at least a minor aspect of community and connection in academic spaces online while in virtual school.

Your place to talk
Whether you're part of a school club, gaming group, worldwide art community, or just a handful of friends that want to spend time together, Discord makes it easy to talk every day and hang out more often.
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Open Discord in your browser

Credit: Jakub Porzycki/Nurphoto Via Getty Images

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Virtual Labs? Virtually Useless

Jessica Khorana
STUDENT LIFE

When I first dreamed about coming to the University of Toronto and starting my university career, I pictured attending lectures in grand halls reminiscent of Hogwarts, exploring the city (A.K.A getting drunk) with my friends on the weekends, and performing experiments in state-of-the-art university labs. Nothing could have prepared me for completing my first two years of university at home through a laptop.

While online lectures and tutorials have been (somewhat) manageable, virtual labs have been one of the biggest downsides of e-learning. As many students in the Life Sciences program can tell you, lab work is a significant component to completing your degree. In first year, you're mainly brushing up on lab practices from high school and learning common research methods used today, like PCR amplification or fluorescence microscopy. In second year, however, you begin to narrow into your field of interest, perform more complex experiments, and have a little more input in designing your procedure. With the shift to virtual learning, however, the most hands-on lab experience students receive is by completing a computer simulation that's more akin to a mobile game than anything of actual educational value.

For those of you who are unaware (and may I say, I envy you for your ignorance), virtual labs typically consist of reading roughly 8-10 pages of a lab manual—potentially a research paper pertaining to the current experiment as well—completing a lab quiz, and watching a series of videos of a T.A. performing the actual experiment while narrating in a monotone voice that puts Severus Snape to shame. To top it all off, you then complete a lab report wherein the most thinking you have to do is identify breaches in lab safety. Of course, certain courses will also have students perform some minor calculations, or perform data computations on a pre-assigned data set, but generally, there tends to be an overall lack of inquiry-based or experiential learning. All in all, not exactly the experience that I was picturing when I thought about studying at U of T.

While I understand that the current situation has forced professors to scramble to rework their syllabi and make do with what they can, it's hard for students to not feel frustrated, as though they are not receiving the full educational value of performing these labs. In fact, when describing their virtual lab experience, one second-year student stated, "I felt like I had not learnt much about realistically how lab work was done in university, as we only did data analysis from given data sets [...] it felt very manual, as if they [teaching assistants] were reading a script or checking through a checklist."

They're not alone, as many other students noted feeling as though learning through virtual labs was insufficient. Another life sciences student described how virtual labs has impacted their overall study habits: "I definitely noticed a drop in my motivation to complete the lab modules because I took advantage of the fact that much of the content was pre-recorded [...] it is an entirely different experience when you can physically feel laboratory glassware in your hands, pipette using a real pipette and not a virtual one [...] though I am capable of learning lab content online by reading and watching videos, it is only once I can physically do something that I really start to have a more enriching learning experience."

As many students noted, there is a vast difference between reading about performing procedures such as titrations and bacterial transformation, and actually *physically* performing them. Of all the students interviewed, not one individual reported feeling confident—nor competent—enough to perform a laboratory technique that they had learned during their virtual labs. Not only has the education of these students been compromised, but there is also the issue of lab safety—there is a large group of students who have not had any wet lab experience whatsoever in a university lab setting, and should we return to in-person labs, these individuals pose as a danger not only to themselves but to others in the lab as well. In an environment where you are handling fragile (not to mention expensive) equipment and working with potentially hazardous materials, the worst thing that you can do is have no idea as to what you are doing.

Virtual labs have also impacted the future of many students' university careers, as it has hindered their ability to get research experience. For many students in the life sciences, having research experience is a necessity, especially if they plan on attending graduate school or medical school, or obtaining a paid position at a lab. However, for those students who have only experienced university labs online, their lack of practical knowledge can leave them at a disadvantage. Most research positions—paid or otherwise—have previous lab experience as a prerequisite, and given that these positions are already highly competitive, the current situation has left many students feeling disadvantaged when compared to upper years, who have at least received 1-2 years worth of in-person labs.

One student voiced how the competition for experience in professional labs has significantly increased since before the pandemic. Another expressed their frustrations at applying for summer internships, "... there are a lot of job postings that require some sort of lab experience, which I would have gotten had my courses been in person, but I can't apply to them because I'm not confident working in a physical lab." I, myself, can't help but feel a combination of agitation and self-loathing upon seeing "previous experience working in a lab" under the posted requirements when applying for a research position, and I annoyingly think to myself, *well I would have freaking lab experience had it not been for the pandemic and we were in person.*

Given the price of tuition and the experience that they have received with virtual labs, a vast majority of the students

interviewed have complained about feeling cheated, with many calling for reduced tuition costs, or at the very least, access to some of the lab materials to complete their labs at home. As one student pointed out, "Tuition costs include lab fees, such as access to the laboratory itself, the materials, the experiments, which I never got to use or even see and still had to pay for it." Another student stated, "I often have this lingering feeling in the back of my head that I am spending a lot of money, but I feel as though I am not getting as much learning done out of my degree by learning virtually."

With it being almost three years since I last stepped foot in a lab, I can't help but feel as though virtual labs have been virtually useless. It feels as though all I have been doing in these online labs is mindlessly reading through experimental procedures without *actually* understanding what it is that I'm reading. As one student mentioned, I also noticed a significant decline in my motivation to complete the lab modules. At one point, I was only watching the experiments to identify the answers to the lab reports and receive a good grade—I wasn't actively paying attention to what was occurring in the experiments, and in the end, all I did was devalue my own learning. With the university's move towards in-person learning in February, I can only hope that in-person labs will attempt to compensate for the fact that some students have missed out on the vital experiential learning that comes with lab work.

Combatting Homelessness with a House of Cards

An indictment of Toronto's shelter system and a call to action for the Tory Administration

Angelina Zahajko
POLITICS

Credit: John Bonnar

On January 13th, 2022, the *Toronto Star* reported that the Toronto shelter system was filled to the brim with residents seeking shelter from the cold and cases of the COVID-19 Omicron variant. Reasons for this declaration include COVID-19 cases amongst residents and the limited staff due to poor PPE provisions and vaccination rates, lack of healthcare expertise among staff, and frigid cold temperatures driving up demand for shelter services.

Following this announcement, mainstream media outlets have primarily pointed to COVID-19 and its subsidiary factors as the cause for the crisis' peak; however, it's naive to claim that COVID-19 bears the sole responsibility. Rather, COVID-19 has merely magnified the pre-existing systemic issues that have plagued the industry—issues that shelter workers, residents, and advocates have tried to eradicate to no avail for years. It has become impossible to ignore the crisis as the shelter system's house of cards is one wayward wind away from collapse.

This article strives to fill a gap within the mainstream media coverage by examining the shelter system through a historical lens and using that knowledge to make an indictment of the system, address the government's poor response to the crisis, and suggest ways to transformatively rebuild.

Government neglect regarding the Toronto shelter system has been a long, public, and well-documented issue; yet, the city and many of its residents have come down with a cyclical case of historical amnesia since the 1980s.

While advocacy against homelessness has always existed, the movement began to pick up in the 1980s after urban restructuring had engendered a significant change in the number and demographics of what was called the "new homeless." This early movement was spearheaded by the Single Displaced Persons Project (SDPP): a network of churches, social service members, and philanthropists that fought for those most marginalised in Toronto by attacking failures in economic systems.

As this network of activists and organizations grew into an anti-homelessness movement, their primary focus was addressing rapidly emerging neoliberal and entrepreneurial patterns in the city that are now weaved into the fabric of Toronto identity. They fought for a long-term, affordable housing system, not an emergency shelter system. Their dedicated fighting resulted in the city's first-ever provincially funded subsidised housing program. It was a historic win for activists and homeless individuals, so naturally, it was walked back in 1993 when the federal government reduced funding for affordable housing and gave all jurisdiction to the provincial government over social funding. With the recent recession, the late-90s set the stage for a rapid increase in both government-wide austerity politics and the emergence of the "real estate state" in Toronto.

This term, coined by Samuel Stein, describes the dominant urban planning discourse that is predicated upon the sole interests of developers and increasing real estate values; thereby, engendering the gentrification and luxury condo-building that is increasingly ubiquitous in all major global cities.

These factors plunged homelessness into the grimmest figures Toronto had seen in decades and it is this entangled web of performative actions, neoliberal politics, and government neglect that this millennium's activists and organizations have been striving to unravel.

Dr. David Roberts moved to Toronto 14 years ago after working within the Seattle shelter system and now serves as the director of the University of Toronto's Urban Studies program and advocates for

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Toronto's downtown east communities. In a conversation with *The Innis Herald*, he argued that, as long as he has been here, not only has there never been enough shelter spaces in Toronto, but the shelters that do exist vary greatly in quality and security.

"Some shelters are just as bad as being in a large open space with beds. There's sometimes violence, there's definitely been the spread of disease... It's that sort of knife's edge in terms of providing necessary supports, but not being underfunded or beyond capacity."

The problems of the shelter systems have been crystallized in this devastating cycle that mirrors the issues of the past. In 2020, the *Toronto Star* published an editorial that could have been stolen from the original SDPP's manifesto on the importance of building houses, not shelters, for the homeless. In 2003 and 2013, the City of Toronto voted to keep shelter capacities under 90%, yet shelters are as overcrowded as they were 30 years ago, if not more. Finally, CBC reported in 2016 that activists rallied together a petition to John Tory to open large armouries to provide additional winter shelter, prevent overcrowding, and limit the spread of a viral outbreak.

Cyclical historical amnesia is one powerful drug.

COVID-19 has undoubtedly exposed the shelter system's faultlines, but to claim this virus as the sole reason for its impending collapse erases the decades of activism, struggle, and systemic discrimination against Toronto's unhoused population.

Regarding the contemporary crisis, a City of Toronto press release expressed "the City's commitment to ensuring the safety of people experiencing homelessness remains unwavering...Throughout the pandemic, the City has prioritised the health and safety of people experiencing homelessness in shelters and outdoor settings and will continue to do so, especially now, in light of the Omicron variant."

These baseless statements are a lot more palatable than the sour reality. According to City of Toronto data, the death count of unhoused people has been steadily increasing since the pandemic began. In 2020, there were 78 shelter resident deaths; in 2021, that number nearly doubled to 132. Furthermore, according to a City of Toronto report, while the average life expectancy of a housed Toronto resident is 81 years old, the average life expectancy of a shelter resident is 47. Finally, in a recent press release, media representatives for the Tory administration boasted about Toronto's shelter system being the largest in Canada with space for 7,200 residents. They fail, however, to mention that the shelter system is concentrated in the southeast and southwest corners of the city, therefore, limiting access to residents, and Toronto is home to 7,350 recorded homeless residents with hundreds to thousands of additional unrecorded homeless or precariously housed people.

These grim statistics are particularly concerning for Toronto's BIPOC, LGBTQAI2S+, and refugee communities who are more likely to experience homelessness. To capture these statistics and still believe that Toronto ensures an "unwavering and prioritised commitment to the health and safety of homeless people" is a reflection of the municipal government's disregard for unhoused people's lives and the shelter workers maintaining the shelter system's feeble structural integrity.

Short and long-term solutions are needed to repair the fatal foundational fissures in the shelter system. Thanks to the relentless fight of community advocates, the Tory administration has begun to meet short-term solutions. Since the shelter system's collapse in early January 2022, the city has implemented four primary strategies to support shelters, including temporarily expanding the system by occupying community centres and 26 other large venues, opening four warming centres facilitated by the city's Streets to Home Program, and providing mobile vaccine clinics and N95 masks to shelters in an attempt to slow the spread of the Omicron variant. While these short-term solutions will address the overcrowding and high COVID-19 transmissions, these programs are band-aids on systemic bullet wounds.

Regarding long-term public health and safety concerns, Dr. Roberts offers a solution that, while costly, is likely to address long-term disease prevention that has long plagued the system. Roberts suggests, "[Things like plexiglass around beds and robust cleaning protocols] don't actually solve the biggest challenge of COVID, which is that it's airborne and doesn't sit on surfaces very long... From my understanding, more leading research is about cleaning air through ventilation systems and filters... as a mechanism to reduce the spread."

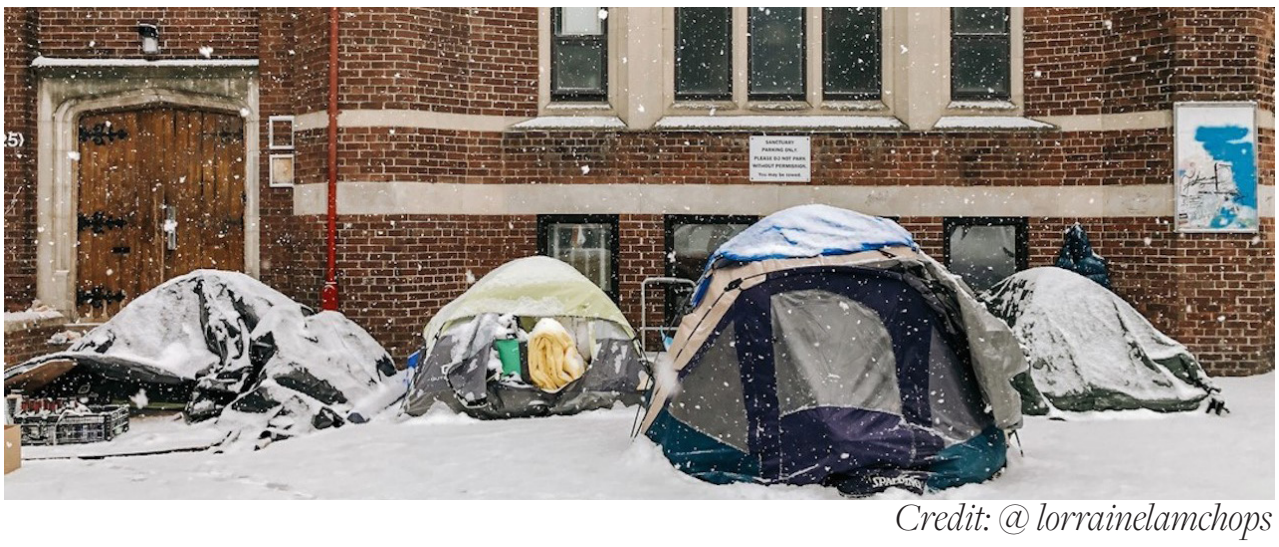
"Many of these shelter buildings were not built to house people... It really would take a significant investment but it's likely that that investment would not just prevent the spread of COVID, but also reduce the spread of cold and flu and all kinds of other sorts of indoor airborne diseases and toxins."

Moving away from public health solutions, the City of Toronto and the Ontario Government must finally answer the cries that started with SDPP in the 1980s: we don't need more shelters, we need more affordable houses and fewer luxury condos. According to the city's 2021 Budget for Shelter, Support, and Housing Administration, the Tory administration's operating budget for housing services will continue to decrease by approximately $100 million from 2021 to 2023.

The Ontario Government must intervene to aid the municipal government's funding plans. Waitlists can no longer be backed up, affordable housing can no longer be surrendered to luxury condo development downtown, and the Toronto Police should no longer compose the largest section of the city budget—an institution that has historically been used to control homeless populations.

Furthermore, both governments must address the colonial and neoliberal socioeconomic structures that continually discriminate against BIPOC, LGBTQAI2S+, and refugee communities. To quote Toronto Indigenous Harm Reduction, "Indigenous people cannot be homeless on their homelands."

We have historically combatted homelessness in Toronto by building houses of cards. While these measures look like solutions from the outside, they crumple under scrutiny and have failed the communities they "unwaveringly serve" for decades. It should not have come to this, but one can only hope that the catastrophic consequences of the mishandling of COVID-19 within the shelter system will finally force governments to look at how Canada is failing their homeless communities, listen to advocate's pleas, and create transformative changes.



Credit: @ lorrainelamchops

What Defines an "Elite" Athlete?

Ontario's Current Definition Remains Vague and Requires a Reassessment

Brandon Terry
SPORTS

While the pandemic has impacted the lives of everyone, one group that has been (and continues to be) neglected and uncredited during the pandemic are university and collegiate athletes, especially those in the province of Ontario. On January 5th, 2022, Ontario enacted stricter public health measures in an effort to slow the spread of the COVID-19 Omicron variant within the province, including the closure of "non-elite" gyms and training facilities and the barring of fans at various sporting events, including professional leagues such as the NHL and the NBA.

Although Ontario has enacted similar COVID-19 restrictions prior, specifically during the Canada-wide lockdown in the early stages of the pandemic, this was the first time OUA (Ontario University Athletics) athletes were barred from practicing in university facilities, bringing a screeching halt to their seasons. These new provincial restrictions against OUA athletes combined with the closure of "non-elite" gyms and training facilities have sparked enormous outrage and discontent from university and collegiate-level athletes alike as "elite" professional athletes were exempted from these restrictions and their seasons were allowed to proceed, thus creating a serious divide between university athletes and professional athletes.

According to a *CBC* article, the "Return to Play" policy established in 2020 allowed for several elite amateur leagues to continue operation despite the winter 2021-2022 provincial restrictions. Out of the seven elite amateur leagues listed, the OUA and OCAA (Ontario College Athletics Association) remained excluded from this list. Although Ontario's reason for separating university and college athletes from other "elite" athletes in amateur leagues throughout the province remains unknown, the province's current definitions of "elite" athletes should be challenged and perhaps redefined, even after the current COVID-19 pandemic has subsided. The recent outrage from many OUA athletes has and continues to challenge Ontario's current definition and classification of "elite" athletes.

In an interview with *The Innis Herald*, a few players representing the University of Toronto Varsity Blues women's basketball team were asked what they believe defines an "elite" athlete. Jess Muha says, "In Ontario, we're competing at the highest level offered for where we're currently at in life." Lauren Boer adds to Muha's statement and says, "Not only do we put in a tremendous amount of work every day, but the amount of work it took to get to where we are supersedes everything."

During Muha's and Boer's interview, they also mention how Ontario, as well as Canada, currently lacks a professional women's basketball league, thus emphasizing the highest achievement in Ontario for female university and collegiate athletes. Muha and Boer's statements on what they believe define elite athletes not only describe the current experiences of university and collegiate athletes in Ontario but more importantly, the experiences of female university and collegiate athletes within the province, who often go unrecognized and neglected.

Fiorella Granada believes that being classified as "elite" not only includes the amount of hours spent training and practicing, but also the level of skill and talent that an athlete possesses. "There is both a qualitative and quantitative aspect to it because you can base an elite athlete off the number of hours they put into training, film, practice, etc., but there's also the skill aspect. In the OUA in particular, both the qualitative and quantitative aspects are demonstrated because across the OUA there are so many athletes at high calibre universities, like ours, who put the blood, sweat, and tears into their sport each day, and also have to deal with the pressures of school, which is not an easy task."

Granada also mentions how participating in athletics while simultaneously studying in university builds important life skills. "I think it's something that'll help you grow in the future and it's bigger than just being in university. I think it makes me an elite person." Christine Jurcau adds to Fiorella Granada's definition by adding the importance of balancing the challenges of mental health along with everything else while being a university athlete. "Across the OUA, all athletes of all sports are working every single day. Whether it's practice or your own additional methods, and even your nutrition and mental health, fulfilling and balancing these tasks defines us as elite."

During the interview with the University of Toronto's Varsity Blues women's basketball team players, significant amounts of emphasis were put on the importance of remembering that both university and collegiate athletes in Ontario are also university or college students at some of Canada's highest and most elite institutions, which is often forgotten about. As university and collegiate athletes pursue their degrees while simultaneously striving to achieve their athletic goals, significant amounts of time and effort are required from their daily lives to do so. University and collegiate athletes are expected to maintain their school's academic standards (including their own) along with their athleticism, thus also playing a key factor in their mental health.

The importance of mental health and wellness has also arisen during the COVID-19 pandemic as mental health continues to play a defining role, perhaps the most important role, not just for professional athletes, but especially university and collegiate athletes as they are expected to maintain their athleticism along with

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their academic standards, and even a part- or full-time job for some athletes.

Another important factor that must be considered is accessibility as many university and collegiate athletes may lack access to the various equipment or even space needed to maintain their athleticism. Lack of accessibility has not only affected ordinary citizens but perhaps more significantly, university and collegiate athletes throughout the current pandemic. During the province's current COVID-19 restrictions, the Varsity Blues players mentioned how they have been forced to train outside as an alternative during the current winter season instead of indoors, which is not ideal as freezing temperatures combined with snowy weather continue to add another layer of barriers that university and collegiate athletes must endure.

The recent additions of Ontario's new COVID-19 restrictions have only continued to alter and complicate the lives of university and collegiate athletes, thus also altering their mental health in the process. Even beyond current COVID-19 restrictions, the province of Ontario's current definitions and classifications of "elite" athletes should be reassessed as the required tasks of university and collegiate athletes include balancing athletics, academics (additionally online learning), part- or full-time jobs, and most importantly their mental health. The ability and even the required efforts to balance these tasks should rightfully be defined and classified as "elite."

From Beijing to Qatar: A review of 2022's most controversial sports events

Kunal Dadlani
SPORTS

2021 was an entertaining year in the sports realm. To the disappointment of millions of English fans watching in Wembley, Italy won the Euro Soccer Cup Championship. The Milwaukee Bucks won their first NBA championship in fifty years, as Giannis Antetokounmpo put up historical stat lines. Tom Brady broke more records, as the Tampa Bay Buccaneers won Super Bowl LV. Unless your teams were on the losing end, these were indeed exciting times.

Yet, sports in 2021 did not lack controversy. In April, twelve major European soccer clubs announced plans to create a European Super League, matched with significant criticism from fans, players, organizations, governments, and other smaller clubs. Meanwhile, Naomi Osaka and Simone Biles attracted both criticism and praise for their decisions not to participate in their respective tournaments to prioritize their mental health. Later, in November, Chinese tennis star, Peng Shuai, was silenced days after accusing a powerful Chinese official of sexually assaulting her.

As 2022 kicks off, one can only hope this year will have more excitement than controversy.

However, already in January 2022, controversy has arisen. Novak Djokovic received worldwide attention as his unvaccinated status created issues with the Australian government. After some flip-flopping by Australian courts, Djokovic was not allowed to participate in the Australian Open and was subsequently deported. This situation will undoubtedly instigate more discussions about the treatment of other anti-vax athletes like Aaron Rodgers, or Kyrie Irving, especially as the pandemic continues to have no clear end in sight.

January 2022 was tumultuous, and is probably the biggest indicator as to why this year will provide more controversy. This includes two notable events, the first of which is the Beijing Winter Olympics.

The Olympics opening ceremony is scheduled for February 4th, with the closing ceremony set for February 20th. Over 19 days, people will have the opportunity to watch around 3,000 athletes compete in fifteen sports, ranging from skeleton to alpine skiing to ice hockey. The Winter Paralympics are also set to take place in Beijing from March 4th to 13th, with 736 athletes competing.

Yet, China's record on human rights has made the Winter Olympics a controversial event. In the northwest province of Xinjiang, several human rights organizations and Western governments have accused the Chinese government of committing atrocities against the Uyghur Muslim population, while in Hong Kong, pro-democracy protests have been suppressed. As a result, many activists criticized the International Olympic Committee's decision to host the games in China and have called for a boycott by countries and sponsors. Furthermore, due to the controversy surrounding Peng Shuai that emerged in November 2021, these calls have intensified.

Amnesty International's China Researcher, Alkan Akad, warned that "The Games should not be used as a distraction from China's appalling human rights record. On the contrary, they should be an opportunity to press China to address these issues."

In response to these calls, the United States, Australia, Britain, Canada, Kosovo, and Lithuania have declared a "diplomatic boycott" of the event. Japan stopped short of declaring a "diplomatic boycott" but has said it would not send ministers to Beijing yet. Comparatively, the EU is split on the topic. German ministers will be boycotting the games to protest the treatment of Peng Shuai, yet, Italy and France are not in favour of a boycott. President Macron declared the boycotts to be "insignificant and symbolic."

So, what does a "diplomatic boycott" mean? Essentially, no government officials of the boycotting country will attend any events during the tournament. Sending diplomats to the events will be viewed as an implicit approval of the actions of the Chinese government. As British MP Iain

Duncan Smith says, "We cannot lend any legitimacy to China's despotic regime."

Most activists have welcomed these boycotts, but some feel that this is not placing enough pressure on the Chinese government. After all, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin's response to the declarations was that invitations had anyway not been extended to the US, UK, or Canada and that it "doesn't matter if their officials come or not." There is much truth in this critique—most people don't care that diplomats will not be there, as, ultimately, people watch the Olympics for the athletes, not the diplomats. Similarly, China won't care if diplomats don't attend—but will they care if athletes don't?

A full-scale boycott could be more effective in applying pressure on the Chinese government. Yet, history has shown that these boycotts have produced mixed results. During the Cold War, the boycotts of the Games in 1980 and 1984 did not have substantial political impacts. Yet, boycotts of apartheid South Africa in the 1970s and 80s successfully applied pressure. In the end, however, these boycotts had an unfair impact on innocent athletes who had spent years preparing for these opportunities.

Others have instead argued that engaging in the tournament instead of boycotting ensures an opportunity for valuable diplomacy. This is the argument provided by the British Football Association when asked about their participation in the 2022 World Cup in Qatar – bringing us to the second big sporting event of 2022 that has already attracted controversy.

Unique to its predecessors, the month-long FIFA World Cup in Qatar is set in November and December to avoid the scorching Qatari climate in the summer. Controversy related to this event is not new, as allegations of vote-buying emerged as soon as Qatar was awarded the right to host the tournament. Suspicions have arisen on how Qatar, a tiny nation with a population of 2.7 million and no soccer pedigree, won this right. A FIFA probe cleared Qatar of any wrongdoing, though investigations are ongoing in France and Switzerland. Furthermore, a US indictment in 2020 accused three FIFA executive committee members of receiving payments to back Qatar's bid. Naturally, Qatar denies these allegations.

These are not even the worst allegations that Qatar faces. Qatar has been met with intense criticism due to its treatment of more than a million impoverished migrant workers, mainly from South Asia and Africa. In 2013, the Guardian revealed that widespread exploitation of labourers helped build World Cup infrastructure. The extreme heat and workplace accidents have led to many deaths. One can argue that this is worse than the Beijing Olympics – the tournament itself is being built and supported by gross human rights violations. These allegations have since shed light on the Gulf region's sponsorship system, which requires workers to gain permission from their employer for various actions, like switching jobs or returning home.

Furthermore, activists have criticized Qatar for its male guardianship system, where women's personal decisions are contingent on the approval of their male family members. Additionally, homosexuality is illegal.

Since the emergence of allegations, Qatari authorities have worked to improve working conditions while refuting some. In 2020, new labour laws were introduced in what they claim is an effort to dismantle the Kafala system. On paper, the reforms made would rank Qatar the most worker-friendly country in the Gulf. In reality, while some minimum wage hikes have been enforced, many issues remain. For example, while employers are no longer allowed to confiscate workers' passports, Amnesty International says this practice is still widespread. Stadium organizers have also said they will enable pro-LGBTQ displays, even though homosexuality is illegal.

So, what about boycotts? As mentioned earlier, a boycott is unpopular. Amnesty International pushed back on suggestions of a boycott. Instead, they encourage FIFA to demand more labour reforms in Qatar and for players to utilize their "star power" to promote rights. Yet this kind of approach has been criticized by some activists. They point out that participation in both the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2018 World Cup in Russia have not led to many changes in the human rights situations pertaining to each country. It should also be made clear that the IOC has warned athletes that they are free to express their opinions during news conferences or interviews, but not during the competition or medal ceremonies. It used to be a complete ban on player activism, though the IOC changed their policies around protests and political displays before the Tokyo Olympics.

The positions of foreign governments will likely not change soon, especially with the Winter Olympics quickly closing in. There is still time for things to change regarding Qatar, but the discussion of a boycott has been absent. Yet, it is still questionable whether a boycott (diplomatic or complete) will be effective. The most significant action activists can take is applying pressure to sponsors or to organizers of the events to influence the government to implement better measures.

In the end, there is still much to look forward to in 2022. For one, Canada could be competing at the World Cup for the first time since 1986! Also, if the divisional round was anything to go off of, Super Bowl LVI is bound to be entertaining. Or, maybe we will get some more celebrity boxing this year and get to see Jake Paul fight Jorge Masvidal. Nevertheless, politics and controversy aside, the World Cup and Winter Olympics are still bound to be entertaining.

romanticynicism

Mayumi Ramos

PLAYLIST

Are you a hopeless romantic who savours all the butterflies in the honeymoon phase and day-dreams about slow dancing in a dimly lit room with your lover? Or are you a cynic who wants nothing to do with love and all its sentimentalities? If you're the former, Side A of this playlist is for you. With six dreamy, intimate songs, full of saccharine lyrics (like "My heart's been borrowed, and yours has been blue / All's well that ends well to end up with you"), it's the perfect soundtrack for living room slow dancing (or shameless yearning, if that's more up your alley).

But if you're the latter, listen to Side B. Yes, these tracks carry a "romance makes me want to puke" attitude, but beneath the bravado, there are often thinly veiled traces of panicky desperation and a fear of heartbreak. MARINA's song is a guide of how to be a heartbreaker — at first, it seems like it's just all in good fun, but with the bridge and the punchline, ("Can't risk losing in love again, babe!") the song dramatically reveals that it was all to protect your own heart from being broken. Tracks 10 and 11 are for all the anxious attachment-girls out there: these songs perfectly encapsulate the feeling of always expecting pain, hurt, and negative outcomes to transpire from relationships, and emotionally spiraling over irrational and unfounded worries.

The closing song of this playlist, just like this playlist, has two parts that juxtapose each other both sonically and thematically. My favourite detail are the distorted, industrial-esque synths at the end of "Hard Feelings" that sound almost like a train screeching to a halt on the tracks. Although the first half is about a devastating breakup and the ensuing heartbreak, the second half is a commentary on our generation's relationship culture, ending with Lorde repeating "L-O-V-E-L-E-S-S generation," growing fainter and fainter until it eventually fades out.

[SIDE A]

1. One Last Time — Summer Salt

4. I Adore You — Molly Burch

2. Lover — Taylor Swift

5. Falling In Love — Cigarettes After Sex

3. Valentine — Suki Waterhouse

6. EVERYTHING — The Black Skirts

[SIDE B]

7. I Wanna Boi — PWR BTTM

10. Hit Me Where It Hurts — Caroline Polachek

8. Crush Culture — Conan Gray

11. Do You Think We'll Last Forever? — Caroline Rose

9. How to Be a Heartbreaker — MARINA

12. Hard Feelings/Loveless — Lorde

Pineapple Passion Fruit Valentine's Dessert Recipe

Aminah Naseer *RECIPE*

The month of love is almost in bloom and to prepare you for the sweet February 14th, here is an electric and flavorful dessert to show your love! Whether it's for those special people in your life or just for yourself, this dessert will make a perfect addition to your Valentine's Day celebrations! With its sweetness and bursts of flavor, your taste buds are sure to fall head-over-heels with this dessert!

For this tasty recipe, you will need passion fruit, pineapple, white chocolate, vanilla cake, and coconut ice cream. Now, let's get started!

INGREDIENTS

- 3 cups white chocolate chips
- ¼ cup small pineapple chunks
- 3 passion fruits (save 3 tablespoons of seeds for the topping)
- 1 box vanilla cake mix
- Flat cake pan
- Parchment paper
- Caramel coconut ice cream (or regular coconut ice cream)
- Red food coloring

INSTRUCTIONS

Step 1: Prepare the vanilla cake batter as per the recipe on the box. Additionally, add 6-10 drops of food coloring so the batter is a deep red. Bake the vanilla cake using the instructions on the box mix. Bake in a flat square pan.

Step 2: As the cake bakes, remove the seeds from the 3 passion fruits (saving 3 tablespoons of the seeds) and place them in a food processor/blender. Blend until the seeds have broken down into a liquid.

Step 3: Add the ¼ cup of pineapple to the passion fruit mix and blend until there are no large chunks.

Step 4: Strain the passion fruit pineapple mix and keep the strained fruit juice.

Step 5: Place the fruit juice in the fridge to cool.

Step 6: Wait for your cake to cool down entirely before proceeding to the next step.

Step 7: Cut your cake into 6-12 squares depending on the size of your pan.

Step 8: Place the cake squares on a flat plate covered in parchment paper, with some space between each one.

Step 9: Using a regular spoon, pour about 2 and a half scoops of juice on each square of cake, making sure not to overly soak the cake and coat all the squares.

Step 10: Freeze the squares for 3-5 hours, or overnight.

Step 11: As the squares are freezing, melt the white chocolate chips and add 1-2 drops of red food coloring so the melted chocolate becomes a rosy pink color.

Step 12: Dip and cover the frozen cake squares in the pink chocolate, making sure to cover all the squares.

Step 13: Place the squares into the freezer for 10 minutes until the chocolate has hardened.

Step 14: Remove from the freezer and place a scoop of ice cream on top. Any remaining seeds, pineapple pieces, and fruit juice can be used as toppings for the dessert and ice cream!

Step 15: Eat, enjoy, and fall in love!

NFTs and Innovations in Digital Art

Kyle Newcombe
ARTS AND CULTURE

How much do you think this cartoon ape picture is worth? According to Steph Curry, $180,000.

If you have internet access and a pulse, chances are you've heard about non-fungible tokens (NFTs) over the past year or so. They've gone from niche to mainstream seemingly overnight, and there always seems to be a new headline marking some "milestone" for the NFT community.

It's honestly hard to keep track of all of the new developments, even for an insider such as myself. Beeple, a well-known artist, sold a collection of his work as an NFT for $69 million via Christie's in March 2021. Nas is selling fractionalized ownership of the rights to his songs "Ultra Black" and "Rare" on NFT marketplace Royal, and the Cryptopunk and Bored Ape Yacht Club NFT avatar collections continue to attract numerous celebrity owners such as Stephen Curry, Jimmy Fallon, and Serena Williams. High-end NFTs are becoming status symbols, and more people are participating in the NFT market than ever before. So the question is, just what exactly is a non-fungible token?

Token, in a cryptocurrency sense, is merely *proof of ownership of an asset written into the blockchain*. Let's take something simple, like Ethereum, as an example (think of Ethereum as coins, although this is quite an oversimplification). If I own, let's say, 2 ETH, there is proof of my purchase and ownership written into the blockchain: a decentralized, public ledger that stores and validates cryptocurrency transactions.

Non-fungible just means *the asset is unique and is not equivalent to any other*. Referring back to my Ethereum example, I don't really care which exact Ethereum coins are in my wallet; they're all the same, or in other words, fungible. Non-fungible tokens come into play when you have assets like art, music, etc. that are entirely unique. If I own a unique piece of art on the Ethereum blockchain, I can't exchange it for another one out of the blue. They are entirely different, and therefore non-fungible.

Rounding out the technical aspects of NFTs, there's the storage of the assets. In most cases, these unique tokens refer to something that people actually interact with in the real world, such as art, photos, songs, etc. So the question is, where are these assets kept? In most cases, off-blockchain. Blockchains have non-negotiable file size restraints, so they really aren't good places to store things like art. Most NFTs are actually stored by a marketplace platform or the InterPlanetary File System (IPFS), a peer-to-peer decentralized storage network. The key to understanding most NFTs is that they are *blockchain proof-of-ownership of an asset that is actually stored somewhere else.*

Before moving on, I'd like to make a quick note about the environmental impact of NFTs, and address some of the stigma surrounding their energy use. Many people have valid concerns about the sustainability of cryptocurrency, but let me put your mind at ease; with regards to NFTs specifically, it's getting greener by the day. Blockchain miners are incentivized to use the cheapest energy possible, and in most cases that's renewables. Not to mention, most blockchains that are popular for NFTs are getting rid of miners altogether, along with their copious energy use. In 2022, Ethereum plans to transition from Proof of Work consensus to Proof of Stake consensus, and other blockchains like Solana already use Proof of Stake. The differences are a little complex, but the long and short of it is that Proof of Stake eliminates the need for millions of computers (miners) to be running full tilt guessing numbers, and instead uses financial incentives to secure the blockchain, significantly reducing energy use.

With regards to art, the implications of NFT technology are immense; anyone with some creativity and a little bit of cryptocurrency to cover fees can "mint" and sell NFTs online. In an industry that is known for being exclusionary, especially towards young artists with fresh styles, NFTs promise to eliminate gatekeeping and even the starting line for all creatives. Despite some of the highest-profile NFT sales taking place through auction houses, the endgame of NFTs is ultimately the elimination of the need for them. Any artist can list their art, whether visual, musical, or otherwise, and anyone else can pay whatever they think it's worth with no third-party involvement. The fact that NFTs allow anyone to tell their story has fostered the growth of many communities online, with everyone naturally gravitating to what they are interested in and what they think is valuable.

Aside from art, there are many other potential uses for NFT technology since NFTs can truly be used to record the ownership of anything. Land, buildings, cars, and even jewellery have all been proposed as beneficiaries of NFT technology. These are all high-value hard assets, that of course involve a ton of paperwork and bureaucracy involved in buying and selling plenty of middlemen siphoning off transaction fees for themselves. With a blockchain in place, NFTs could be used as deeds and proof of ownership of these assets with very little friction. Compared to the government databases of today, transferring ownership of assets such as a house or registering an asset such as a vehicle promises to be much easier, faster, and more secure.

NFTs also promise to have huge implications for social mobility via new credit markets geared towards individuals. For example, with land ownership written into a blockchain via a land deed NFT, it becomes much easier to post the land as collateral and borrow against it. Credit scores become much more transparent and easy to calculate since proof of ownership of most major assets an individual holds would be all collected in their blockchain wallet(s). Making it easier for people to borrow against assets, even small ones, allows them to climb the societal ladder much faster; this could lead to a huge standard of living increase for the

Credit: Open Sea

working poor, for example.

That's in the future though. Right now, NFTs are still in their early phase; there's certainly a lot of speculation and gambling taking place right now, even on the part of yours truly. I've been dabbling in some art, as well as some utility domain name NFTs, and even I think that prices are pretty inflated at the moment. The sheer number of NFT art collections is rather overwhelming, and if I had to guess, I'd say that most of these collections aren't going to last in the long term. NFT collections that are actually unique and tell a story are going to be the ones that prevail alongside the practical hard asset applications, and I'm really interested to see what emerges from the inevitable re-rating of the NFT market. Irrespective of the current market conditions, it's hard to deny the utility at the core of the technology, and that's really promising for the future.

Once the Lesser Art: The Revolution of Television

Celine Sleiman
ARTS AND CULTURE

It seems strange to refer to the world of regularly scheduled programming, of commercial breaks and channel surfing, as a thing of the past. But that is precisely what it has become.

The culture of television has undergone a drastic transformation in a relatively short period of time, with the surge of lockdowns having offered a unique opportunity for streaming services such as Netflix to become irreplaceable sources of household entertainment. Interest now wanes at the prospect of twenty-episode seasons, and shows that go on for months at a time. The structure has evolved: longer runtimes, fewer episodes, more momentum. The release of a new show—especially a well-promoted one—and the promise of a satisfying binge-watch is closer to a full scale event than the leisurely activity it once was.

The emergence of Disney Plus, though the service in my opinion runs less smoothly than platforms like Netflix or Amazon Prime, is an apt example of how much television has changed. Disney shows were a comfort for children to come home to in the early-mid 200s, a quick respite from homework, or a reward once the work was done. That association has all but disappeared. By acquiring the most successful movie franchises of our generation— namely Marvel and Star Wars— Disney Plus has offered fan-favourite stories the chance to delve more deeply into their lore and explore characters that were once brushed aside, forgotten in the grandeur of the big screen.

Projects like *The Mandalorian* and *WandaVision* were met with an explosive fan response, and served as stepping stones for the launching of an interconnected television universe within their respective franchises. By following unexpected secondary characters, and using an in-between-movie structure, these shows have established a new medium of storytelling and have proven that television can wield the same cinematic power as Hollywood. Fans of Star Wars and Marvel have a lot to look forward to in 2022, with the third season of *The Mandalorian*, the long-awaited Obi-Wan Kenobi mini-series, and more obscure titles like *Moon Knight* coming to the streaming service.

However, it is not only franchises that are flourishing in this new medium. The streaming structure also liberates more complex projects from the need to be compressed into a two-hour movie or extended into a twenty-hour season. Amazon Prime, for instance, offered Neil Gaiman and the late Terry Pratchett's unique, apocalyptic comedy Good Omens to be adapted into a six-episode season, after failing as a movie script in the early 2000s. Short seasons have become the ideal format for the exploration of peculiar characters and compelling mythos. Gaiman fans can also look forward to the upcoming Sandman adaptation, which has already been filmed and is set for a 2022 release by Netflix. After years of failed movie pitches, The Sandman—a staple of the comic book industry with all the makings of an Odyssean epic—will finally get its live-action retelling.

In hindsight, Gaiman's decision to wait was a wise one. Some stories are too intricate and so beloved that the movie screen would only stifle them. The fantasy genre specifically has thrived under the freedoms afforded by television. After the success of *Game of Thrones*, fantasy shows have gained an unprecedented level of attention, renewing the media's interest in all things magic and enchantment. With a string of acclaimed adaptations like *The Witcher*, *Locke and Key*, and *The Umbrella Academy,* Netflix has garnered a reputation for taking on stories with rich mythologies and making them accessible to a wider viewership.

The increased interest in television is not limited to viewers. Actors and actresses who once would have considered it a step down in their careers have been swayed by the revolution of the small screen. Names like Meryl Streep, Anthony Hopkins, and Julia Roberts have all starred in streaming projects in recent years. In an interview with The Hollywood Reporter, Sandra Bullock sang Netflix's praises for keeping actors employed and "bringing people together" by translating foreign hits like *Squid Game*.

Once the lesser art, the small screen's potential was shadowed by Hollywood's glittering fame, but television has risen to meet the demands of the media that could not be achieved anywhere else. The excitement of a new season has cultivated its own sort of culture, and the demand for its kind of storytelling has drawn actors and directors down from Hollywood's pedestal and onto a platform with more opportunities for both plot and character development.

The pursuit of storytelling may forever teeter between necessity and risk. In an age of technology and financial insecurity, students are often encouraged to walk the safer path. But if the changes in television are proof of anything, it is our insatiable hunger for stories, for distraction, and for escape. Stories remain one of the only constants in society, and so it is only natural that the way we choose to tell our stories will continue to evolve as we do.

Valentine's Day: For One and For All

Mackenzie Da Silva
ARTS AND CULTURE

Once the Christmas lights go up, the Valentine's Day hearts come out, a turnover most visible when shopping in stores after January 1st. Even websites feature pop-up ads far too early, enticing Internet explorers with "V-Day sales" while echoes of "Happy New Year!" still rings in the ears of those hungover from the festivities.

Visual signifiers such as these peer through every storefront window and threaten to emerge from each subscriber-based email we open. They coax us into thinking that the closer we grow to Valentine's Day, the less opportunity we have to show that special someone in our lives how much they mean to us. A meaning best conveyed by the size of the price tag.

With such pointed marketing—preying particularly on young couples convinced that if they do not wow their partners on February 14th, they could spend the rest of the year's holidays single—the cynical outlook commonly adopted towards Valentine's Day is well supported.

As someone who views Valentine's Day positively despite its more consumer-driven agenda, I have found the secret to enjoying the cinnamon-sugar-coated parts of the day instead of dreading its sourness. The secret involves unlearning the belief that romantic love is the only love worth celebrating.

Every other form of love is a given; our families love us unconditionally and good friends follow suit, but romantic love is constantly growing and needs to be well fed to do so. Hence why Valentine's Day chocolate is sold at full price and becomes significantly cheaper the day after, indicating a missed chance at celebrating romance.

I have learned that love is most prudent in the air when I celebrate all the relationships I am grateful to have in my life at the moment. With this philosophy, Valentine's Day can be spent celebrating romantic love with one's partner, but can also become a time for familial love, love for one's friends, and even a day for self-love.

In the past, I have celebrated the friend Valentine's Day where I invited people over for a winning combination of corny Netflix movies and Chinese takeout. Turning such a get-together into a tradition could create excitement for the upcoming date, rather than apprehension about feeling isolated due to your lack of dinner reservations for two.

I have also celebrated Valentine's Day by myself. You can carry out the day, business as usual, then come home to indulge in some self-care: treat yourself to chocolate, light a candle, and turn on an episode of Gilmore Girls to let the fictional town of Stars Hollow engulf you in its comfort. Spending time alone can be recuperative, healing, and a rarity, so I have learned to enjoy it as best I can.

Last year I spent Valentine's Day working. I worked at Demetres Cafe which exclusively sells desserts, so it is without surprise that come post-dinner hours, restaurant orders filled up. After packing red velvet after red velvet cake for Uber orders and going through enough strawberries to field a small farm, I was truly rocked by the commodification of Valentine's Day.

However, this was not as miserable as it sounds. Once the storm of orders had calmed, I was able to look around and feel mutual appreciation for the team I was working with. I had also felt a new appreciation for myself and confidence in my ability to work for so long under such pressure, a small success amongst the misery of being a minimum wage, part-time employee. I learned that even a Valentine's Day spent ladling coulis on cheesecakes can be filled with its own, unique kind of love.

My goal in retelling how I have spent the holiday in past years is not to bore readers, but to share the truth that while spending the day with big plans celebrating romantic love is great, it is not the be-all and end-all of Valentine's Day happiness.

I think back to where it all started, for me at least, writing the names of classmates and family members into the Shrek scratch and sniff Valentines my mother begrudgingly allowed me to give out at school.

I think of the small traditions that have stuck with me on Valentine's Day, such as my mother ordering a heart-shaped pizza from our local shop for dinner and cheekily showing us the box, expecting surprised reactions every year.

It is gestures and memories as small as handing my grandmother a heart-stickered "I love you" note that fill my Valentine's Days with meaning and joy.

Now I work at a party supply store where it is impossible to ignore the commercially driven aspects of Valentine's Day. Although, it would be insincere of me to write that I do not glance at the Valentine's Day balloons and gush about how darling they are to coworkers, already plotting what I can bring home for my family when the day arrives.

It is moments like these where I come face to face with the commercial takeover of Valentine's Day that my annoyance subdues and my excitement picks up. Just like with Christmas, but with the added pressure placed on romantic love, one can enjoy Valentine's Day products and decorations for what they are: shameless exploitation of the holiday for sure, but also pleasantly pretty items that can be used to make the day as festive as one desires.

If I have done my job successfully, it should be evident now that Valentine's Day for me has always been about finding love everywhere and anywhere and celebrating what I have. It would be hypocritical of me to prioritize romantic relationships now over friends, family, and especially myself.

This year I will not be spending Valentine's Day working. Instead, I will be celebrating a romantic relationship. This does not change the importance one should place on celebrating other types of love in addition to romance.

I still anticipate my mother's opening of the pizza box and ritual "Will you be my Valentine?", and while the tradition of giving out said valentines to my classmates has left me, I still look forward to sending my friends love via text messages or phone calls. I am excited to spend the day romantically as well, not to investigate what the hype surrounding the romantic aspect of Valentine's Day is, but to just spend time with a person whose company I especially enjoy.

There is no right or wrong way to celebrate Valentine's Day and I feel that the pressure and guilt one feels on the holiday is what creates feelings of isolation and loneliness. Despite its pressure, I also do not wish for people to treat Valentine's Day as just another day. With so little opportunities to enjoy oneself in the seemingly never-ending COVID years, I ask people to take advantage of any day which allows for some celebration.

If nothing else, I would like for readers to put aside a little extra time on February 14th to show compassion for those they love, especially themselves. This is how I have come to enjoy Valentine's Day.

Chasing a Mirage: What Valentine's Day Reveals About the Problematic Ways We Love

Clover Chen
ARTS AND CULTURE

I am anti-Valentine's day. Yes, I could argue that Valentine's day is a capitalistic scheme that bastardizes romantic love, one of the only things we cannot place a monetary value on in this world. Yes, I could argue that a holiday that romanticises performative rituals of chocolates and flowers takes away from celebrating healthier aspects of romantic relationships. Yes, I could argue that self-love is neglected and under-celebrated in comparison to romantic relationships. But I would only be able to argue those things if I did not have a more foundational issue, which all those perspectives take for granted; one that lies with the problematic idea of what romance is, fundamentally.

I find Valentine's day problematic because it is a celebration of normative romance and sexuality. I'm no cynic. I *love* love. I am all for it, actually. But my idea of love is very likely to be different from yours.

From a very young age, we have been force-fed a particular narrative: meet the perfect person, fall passionately in love, establish a strong connection with them, be faithful, get married, start a family, and grow old together. We learn about what we want to have, internalising tropes by reading about Prince Charmings and The Girl Next Door, or by seeing Rihanna and ASAP Rocky's couple photos on Instagram. We learn about what we want to avoid by watching people closest to us getting into toxic relationships, or learning against our will about whatever Megan Fox and Machine Gun Kelly have going on. But either way, we fall into imitating the social and cultural paradigms surrounding love.

I notice that the harmful aspects of normative sexuality are an oversight to even the most self-reflective people, my past self included. Our internalised ideas about our most personal relationships tend to escape the rigorous critical thinking we might apply to other topics. Normative romance and sexuality are so ingrained in our culture, media, and social ideas that we often take them for granted.

Another thing that contributes to us not questioning normative sexuality is the fact that normative sexuality, like other dominant cultural powers (ie: whiteness), expands and contracts to whatever will keep it in power and profit. For example, the way Valentine's Day-themed ad campaigns will now include gay couples mixed in with straight couples to show diversity and appeal to a wider audience. Even those marginalised in society are included and recruited into the pyramid scheme of romance.

While normative romance is able to include anyone in its conscription, it also places harmful limitations on its participants. One such limitation is mononormativity.

In the *All My Relations* podcast episode "Decolonizing Sex," Dr. Kim Tallbear defines mononormativity, or compulsory monogamy, as the expectation that long-term monogamy is the normative standard to which we aspire. Mononormativity is founded on the values of capitalism and colonialism. Marriage as an institution historically tied women and children economically to men, awarding the men of the household additional land for their wives and children. Essentially, mononormativity culture was legislatively promoted through marriage as a way of accumulating wealth while policing and owning women's bodies.

Dr. Kim Tallbear, drawing from Indigenous ontologies of good relations, illustrated the colonial implications of compulsory monogamy. She connects the same principles of ownership from the colonial idea of private property to principles of ownership over your partner in monogamous relationship dynamics.

So what would be the solution to mononormativity? The simple answer is popularizing non-monogamy or other unconventional relationship dynamics. But the true goals are to deconstruct the pedestalling of monogamy as the only correct option, destigmatize other relationship models, and focus on relationships where we do not own or police each other's bodies and behaviour.

"I think that part of what a culture of domination has done is raise that romantic relationship up as the single most important bond, when of course the single most important bond is that of community" - Bell Hooks

Relationship anarchy is an approach to intimate relationships that applies anarchist principles like autonomy, anti-hierarchy, and community interdependence. You can form unconventional relationship dynamics where you do anything you want and call it anything you want, so long as everyone involved is consenting and communicating.

Relationship anarchy is, then, a useful approach to challenging compulsory monogamy, but also relationship hierarchies.

Relationship hierarchy is the idea that your relationships have an order of importance in your life, with your romantic relationship holding more value and weight over other ones. Have you ever witnessed a friend get completely consumed by their romantic relationship and then stop spending time with anyone else aside from their partner? That is an example of a relationship hierarchy placing the romantic relationship as paramount over the others.

A related concept is what Rice University philosopher Elizabeth Brake calls amatonormativity: the social expectation that a central, exclusive, romantic relationship is normal for humans. Amatonormativity has a twin concept in compulsory sexuality.

Author of "Ace: What Asexuality Reveals About Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex" Angela Chen defines compulsory sexuality as a set of assumptions and behaviours that support the idea that "every normal person is sexual, that not wanting (socially approved) sex is unnatural and wrong, and that people who don't care about sexuality are missing out on an utterly neces

Continued on page 14 ..

sary experience."

Do you ever notice how virtually every song on the radio is about either love, sex, or both? Amatonormativity and compulsory sexuality furiously manifest themselves in the media we consume, with harmful effects on our identity, language, and institutions. The way we conceive sexuality and romantic relationships is political.

For example, sexual liberation in feminism has come to mean that having a super exciting and pleasurable sex life is empowering. And yet, as Angela Chen puts it, "because sexual variation exists, there is no universal vision of liberated sexuality." Instead, true sexual liberation is the freedom of choice with one's own sexuality.

Both amatonormativity and compulsory sexuality work in tandem with mononormativity to create a broader idea of what is normative romance and sexuality. Heteronormativity is also included in this construction of normative love.

Heteronormativity, coined by Michael Warner, refers to how both our legal institutions and sociocultural institutions are entrenched with heterosexuality as an ideal and devalue any deviation from this norm. This originates from colonial binary ideas about gender and sexuality that shape how we conceptualise romantic social scripts. It also manifests in the words we use for topics like parenthood, i.e. the nuclear family, marriage, and other relational language.

All of those above-defined terms play into how we culturally conceptualise love, romance, sexuality, and consequently what we celebrate on Valentine's day.

Rethinking Romance and How We Love

"The idea of romantic love is one 'of the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought.'" — Toni Morrison, in The Bluest Eye

Ask yourself for a second, "what is romance?" Images of heart-shaped chocolates or a surprise bouquet of flowers might pop into mind. Or maybe you have your own ideas of intimacy and closeness.

Whatever the case, the idea of romance is much more fragile than we might initially believe. It is easy to deconstruct its defining features by asking how romantic relationships differentiate from other non-romantic ones.

Yes, you might not kiss or have sex with your friends, but you might in a Friends-With-Benefits dynamic. Yes, you may not share your most intimate secrets with your one-night-stand lover, but you might with your closest friends. You can surprise your friends with flowers, you can take yourself out on dates. All of these "defining" features are not unique and exclusive to a romantic relationship.

So the question stands, what is it about a romantic relationship that makes it so special? Spoiler alert: nothing in particular. Romantic love is a social construct, reinforced by normative culture.

As I touched on above, a lot of the ideas surrounding romantic love and sexuality celebrate colonial, capitalist values. These cultural norms go hand in hand with other systems of oppression, like white supremacy, ableism, gender-based violence, or faith-based discrimination. The narrative of normative love is a political tool that decides what is considered transgressive and who is transgressing.

This is key because beliefs surrounding normative love can be dangerous or even deadly. One instance of this in play is how amatonormativity and compulsory sexuality culture make it dangerous for women to turn down advances from men from fear of being attacked or murdered.

Dismantling normative ideas surrounding love can help dismantle conditioned and commonly held beliefs about the either repressive or hypersexual sexuality of people with disabilities, BIPOC folk, and queer people. They can dismantle similar ideas that we might have internalised about the relational capacities of oppressed groups as well.

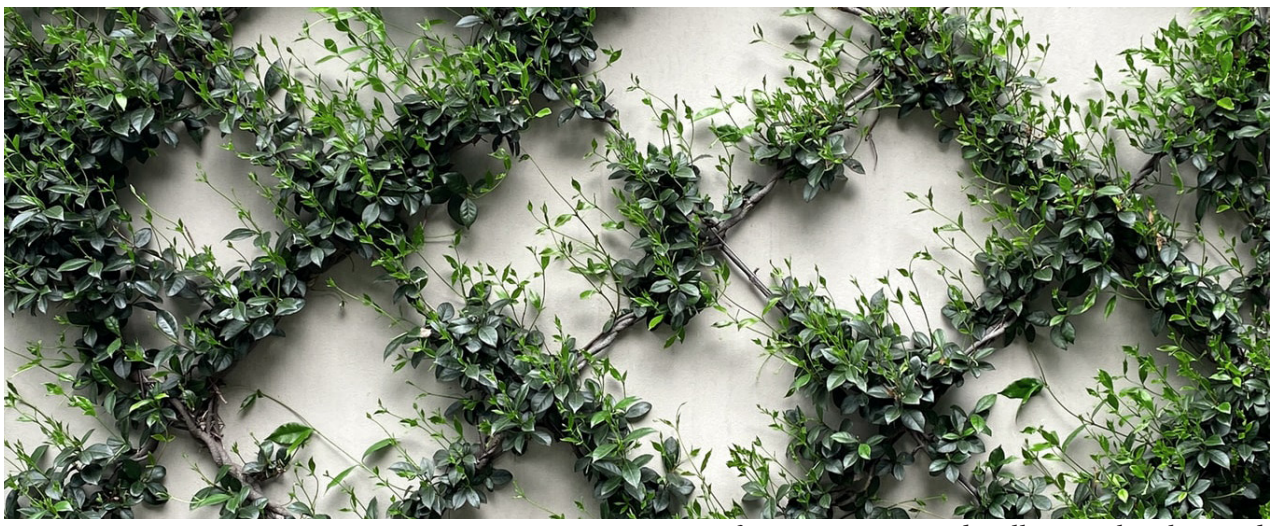
Calling into question what we assume to be true about our personal relationships is an easy but essential way to oppose harmful social forces. We need to reflect on what values we are upholding when we sigh dreamily after reading a 43 chapter slow-burn slash fanfiction of our favourite anime ship.

Yeah. If that last example was a bit too specific, please take that as a sign that I am just as indoctrinated into amatonormativity as everyone else. But I am also committed to unlearning these cultural norms and intentionally questioning my social conditioning.

I *love* love. But accepting normative love just because it was handed to us is unacceptable. As psychoanalyst and social philosopher Erich Fromm wrote, "Love [is] a choice. Love [is] something within our control." We have the power to transform what we understand love to be.

ivy

Lea Jiang
CREATIVE



Her gloved hand met mine above the frosty grave at exactly 11:38 in the morning. She walked over from the stone next to me, having left a bouquet of fresh flowers that would surely freeze and die by the time she was gone. She left them anyway. She had come to remember someone she loved. I, no one in particular, at least no one dead anyway. The initial instinct to jerk my hand from a stranger's grip was quickly defeated by the desperate urge to be acknowledged. Crisp November air pinched my throat with my puzzled inhale. Maybe today I'd humour this woman and my own escapist fantasies.

"Who are you here for?" she asked, kind eyes flickering up to mine.

"Oh, um, no one really."

A clear lie. There was heaviness in my chest that threatened to pull the grief from my throat. I yearned to pull someone, anyone, into my lonely orbit. My fingers tingled with an electric longing to squeeze the frustration I had come here with into her. My thumb strayed to rub the bare skin I had twisted my wedding ring from that morning. I stayed silent.

"Well, I'm here for my grandma. As of today, it's been a whole five years." she paused, turning her gaze back to her grandmother's grave for a moment and pulling up her knitted scarf to wipe her nose, "Cancer's a bitch."

"Shit," I mumbled.

She inched closer to me, "Yeah, not the most glamourous of deaths. I think she wanted to get into a bomb-defusing accident, you know," her eyes softened, and she gave a sharp, amused exhale from her nose, "go out with a bang."

My laughter surprised me, "That's good. Was she funny?"

She shined a triumphant smile at me. "Clever as a fox, that woman. I miss that the

most."

My god. There was this sudden brightness under her skin that I hadn't seen before. This woman could part skies with her wit. I turned to face her, hand still in her woolen grasp and gently said, "I'm Este."

"Taylor," she replied.

...

Three weeks of meeting behind the willow at the graveyard passed by before she kissed me for the first time. It was another two months before I told her I was married. I took her up to the cottage by the lakes and, hands trembling, confessed under the kitchen light on the very last night. We had just come in from a walk by the frozen water. The fire in the hearth still danced, though it looked like it would turn to embers soon. She made a beeline to the hearth, tossed in a new log, and then bounced to the kitchen as though the fire had lent her some of its newfound energy. No, she was the fire. Warm, lively, I needed her to survive. Shit. I wanted to preserve this moment, preserve her in a still image so I could never leave it. But I couldn't keep lying to her; she deserved honesty from me.

She was stirring cocoa powder into a pot of milk when I pulled her from the stove, turned her hand upward, and placed my wedding ring in the centre of her palm.

She looked at her palm in shock, then back up into my eyes. "Este," she smiled in disbelief, "what the fuck is this?"

Her whispered words fell through clenched teeth like sand through fingers. I thought I was going to throw up. The back of my throat tensed in a desperate attempt to hold back a sob.

"God, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

She blinked in confusion, then in steely understanding. Wiping the anger that welled in her eyes, she left with my ring clenched in her fist. Twenty minutes felt like twenty years as I sat on the tiled floor waiting for her to come back to me. I smelled the milk burning, and just as I got up to scrape the pot, she walked back in. After the initial shock had worn off, she seemed to have good sense to ask, "Fuck, Este...First, tell me one thing. Whose fucking house is this?"

I rushed to answer, "Ours. Well, his grandma left it to him in the will, but really I'm the only one who comes up anymore." I admitted. I felt my stomach heave. Then, in a selfish plea to win back some favour, I spat out, "But he won't find us here."

She breathed out a soft "Oh." Drawing back her shoulders and straightening her neck she quietly asked, "Who else have you brought here with you?"

I was struck by her resigned tone. I had expected her to scream and throw the nearest ceramic at me. It's strange, but when I realized that her reaction was not going to be violent, relief folded itself into gratitude, and gratitude into love. She wasn't going to hurt me. I felt that she was preparing for disappointment, not anger. I scrambled to reassure her, "No one else. I swear. It's only ever been you."

A shaky exhale. A drop of the battle stance. She believed me. She placed the ring back in my hand and closed my fingers around it, as if signaling to me that my past was mine. Good. She didn't belong there with all the mess.

"This," she squeezed my closed fist, "is none of my goddamned business. Understood?"

I nodded, "I just thought you should know."

"I know, I know."

She held me with such soft tenderness that I thought I might shatter. Our love affair may have been nascent, but it was the only thing that had made me feel alive in seven years. She willed joy into existence; creation was hers to command. I would swear to anybody's god that there was magic in her soul.

Her hair glowed in the dim kitchen light like a nymph's in the incandescence. Every passing moment in her arms felt like a year's worth of new growth.

She would ruin me, and I would let her.

...

He had one elbow against the doorframe while the other gestured erratically around his head. I kept my eyes trained on the crystal glass in his hand. Pungent whiskey sloshed up the sides as he detailed his firm's newest acquisition with fiery passion. Taylor sat atop the dark wooden stool at the kitchen island, perched like an eagle watching for field mice. She looked like she was waiting for a reason to dive into the tall grass.

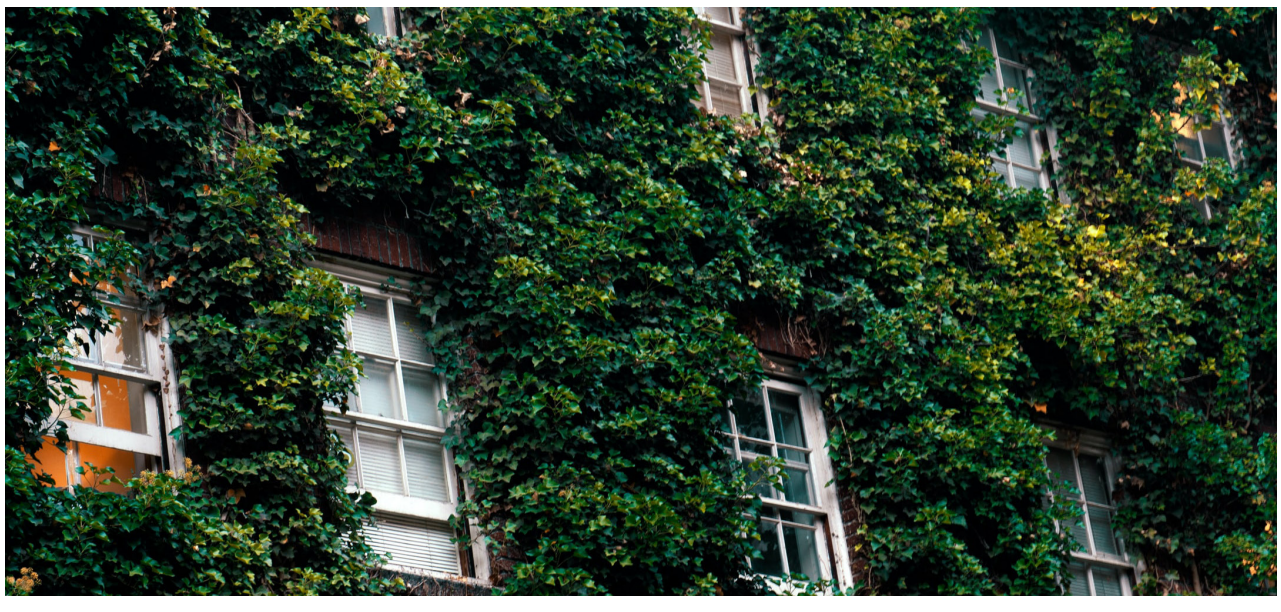
As we smiled and nodded the evening away, liquor permeated our breaths and our thoughts. His glass, now empty and replaced by a lit cigar, sat alone back at the oak table. He seemed calmer. I felt walls melt with each sip, and some magnetic force pulled me closer to Taylor through the evening's hours until I hopped up to sit on the cold white marble of the kitchen island. I turned to look at her, and the edges of her eyes creased with her soft smile. I smiled back, feeling her arm draped on my thigh like a woolen blanket, then turned back to my husband.

He had stiffened. Despite his slightly slurred speech, his senses had stayed sharp enough to notice for the first time in the entire night how close to Taylor I had stayed. His gaze seared into the touch of her elbow resting on the hem of my dress, then up to meet my gaze. My hand crept down to push her off of me, but the fire did not leave his eyes.

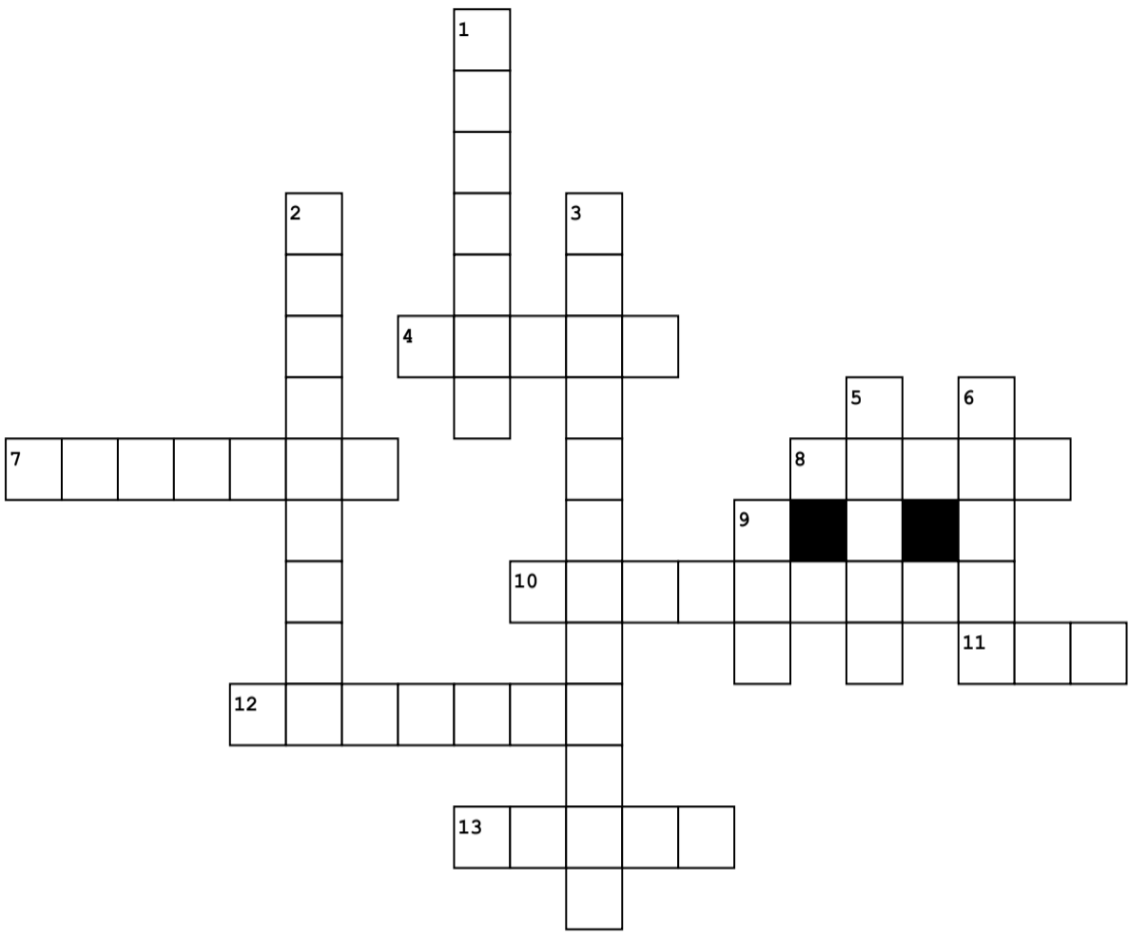
When Taylor left for the night, the house fell into tense silence. The only sound that echoed through our halls was the clicking of his lighter. His thumb played with the flame, on, off, on, off, until we went to bed without a word.

Lying at opposite edges of our king-sized bed (he insisted on the luxury, and I reveled in the widened distance between us) and facing opposite walls, I wondered what could possibly have tempted Taylor into dinner and drinks under the roof that housed the man she took the place of. I wondered what lust for danger tempted her into the arms of a woman. A married one, no less. I had pulled hair out of my scalp trying to scrape my mother's doctrine from my mind, but Taylor never budged in her belief that she did not make a choice or a mistake in loving women. There was a brilliant kind of courage to her, one that she wielded like a sword, and I dreamed of wearing like armour someday. Loving her felt like freefalling over a cliff; the wind muffles everything but the adrenaline. I knew I was probably rushing toward disaster, but until then I would bask in electric passion. We both risked much more than being accused of adultery in being with each other because cheating they could forgive. What we had would have us smeared with the red paint of shame and sin, but the bottom of the canyon hadn't crushed our bones yet.

When her eyes glance across the room to whisper a silent thought, I think that maybe two women on their own could make it. Or maybe we would go down in flames. And if we do, I know that in the ashes of that self-made fire, we could build a new house that stands long enough for ivy to grow over the windows.



CROSSWORD



DOWN

1. Enjoyed by bees and lovers alike
2. A saint
3. Shadow or no shadow? (2 words)
5. Chinese New year
6. Year of the _____
9. A respectful, often royal, greeting

ACROSS

4. Directs
7. The best week of February for university students
8. A cherub
10. Becomes discounted the day after Valentine's Day
11. The colour of love, blood, sun sets, luck, prosperity
12. The 2022 Winter Olympics
13. A romantic, bloody organ

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SUDOKU

EASY

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7	4	6			2			
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HARD

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